

Sister ships identical, a bond "May 5th"

USS FECHTELER, DE 157 & USS LANING, DE 159

Both ships made identical, Buckley class, built at Norfolk Navy Yard, Portsmouth Virginia. 306 feet long 36 feet and 10 inches wide at the beam, crew of 215 seamen, shakedown cruise Bermuda. Fechteler was launched April 22, 1943. Sponsored by Miss Joan S. Fechteler, commissioned July 1, 1943. Laning was launched July 4, 1943. Sponsored by Mrs Mable C. Laning, commissioned August 1, 1943. Typical destroyer escorts.

From September 8th to the 31st of December 1943 these two ships helped escort two convoys OT "Oil Torch" fast-tanker convoys from the Caribbean Sea, Curacao to the Mediterranean Sea, Bizerta and Algiers and back with an average of eight tankers each. Sailed at 32 day intervals, these convoys supplied armies in the Italian Campaign with much needed gasoline and oil products. Encountered German submarine, near the strait of Gilbraltar and while at Algiers both ships searched all night for a U-Boat that torpedoed a British destroyer. DE 157 and DE 159 worked together as a team and would tie up along side of each other at sea ports, where you saw one you would usually see the other.

In January of 1944 the two ships parted ways, separated went on different voyages but in April they met again. Fechteler under command of skipper Lt. Calvart B. GILL and Laning under command of skipper LtCmdr. E. Arthur Shuman, Jr. Ships met at Hampton Roads Norfolk, Virginia to help escort convoy "UGS-38", more than 100 ships, believed to be the largest convoy to ever cross the Atlantic Ocean.

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Convoy "UGS-38" from the United States to Gibraltar and the Mediterranean Sea and becomes "GUS-38" homeward bound. Same convoy eastward and westward. Convoy consisted of eighty-five merchant vessels, two navy tankers, two coast guard cutters, Duane and Taney twelve United States destroyer escorts, Joseph E. Campbell DE 70, Chase DE 158, Falgout DE 324, Fechteler DE 157, Fessenden DE 142, Fiske DE 143, Laning DE 159, Lowe DE 325, Menges DE 320. Mosley DE 321, Newell DE 322, Pride DE 323. Escorted by Task Force 66, flagship USCGC Taney, the sole survivor of 101 vessel of the Pearl Harbor attack, Commodore Commander, W.H.Duvall.

Convoy "UGS-38" departed Norfolk April 3rd, smooth slow sailing for two weeks. It was early spring, beautiful weather, plenty of sunshine, sight was spectacular, ocean water blue and calm, waves from ships gave the flying fish a chance to fly across decks of DE's, some landing on decks. Saw many schools of porpoises jumping out of the water in complete unison as if they were being drilled like sailors on a parade field in boot-camp, even better. This voyage across the Atlantic was peaceful and enjoyable, the watch, four hours on and eight hours off wasn't bad, even the food was good.

What a beautiful sight, seeing all those different types of ships sailing the same way in column after column with all the escorts ships around them. Ships carrying troops and all kinds of materials that took weeks even months to make or build in defense plants, ocean looked as if it was covered with ships, During this period of time no one on board could imagine what lay ahead, German aircrafts and submarines.

Another convoy "UGS-37" was crossing the Atlantic ahead of convoy "UGS-38" by nine days and on April 11, 1944 "UGS-37" was attacked by German aircraft in the Mediterranean near the coast of North Africa, Cape Bengut 42 miles east of Algiers was called "Torpedo Junction". the USS Holder DE 401 was hit by a torpedo that damaged her bow, she stayed afloat and was towed to port. This same fate lay ahead for convoy "UGS-38".

Naval war in the Mediterranean Sea during the prolonged Anzio deadlock which lasted from January until June 1944. Allied convoy escorts had fought life-and-death battles on that sea-going road which entered the Mediterranean through the Straits of Gibraltar, trailed along the coast of North Africa. These battles did not make front page news but they were all part and parcel of the effort that loosened the Nazi grip on Italy and southern Europe. Typical was the onslaught on convoy "UGS-37" "UGS-38" "UGS-38" which sank allied cargoes, killed allied sailors and cost the navy three hard fighting war ships, the USS Holder, USS Lansdale and USS Fechteler.

The enemy knew well when UGS convoy was coming. In order to avoid mine fields in the approaches to Gibraltar, convoys had to pass the Strait in daylight, and for 40 miles their course lay within sight of the Barbary coast where Axis spies and coast watchers were thick as fleas, the stretch of 110 miles from Europa point to Alboran Island was usually traversed at night, after which the convoy closed the Algerian coast about 25 miles west of Oran and hugged the shore for 180 miles to Algiers. Their progress along shore was signaled by bonfires on the beaches and in the hills, kindled by degenerate descendants of Barbary corsairs in Axis pay.

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During 1944, Mediterranean Convoys encountered some of the toughest air versus surface battles of the entire war. In April the German air offensive grew more intense. It was aimed at the big UGS convoys, principal means of supplying Allied campaign in Italy, of building up for the invasion of southern France, and carrying materiel to India and Russia. Destruction or diminution of these convoys was of such vital importance that Marshal Goering (in charge of all of German aircraft) used all resources that he could spare from the Italian and Russian fronts and all the tactical ingenuity he could muster. These efforts long persisted, despite heavy losses.

The planes used in these attacks, based on airfields in southern France and on Bordeaux, were not numerous, amounting to about 140 JU-88's HE-111's DO-217's carrying torpedos, bombs and controlled glide-bombs. Owing to the recent improvement in antiaircraft fire of allied escorts and of the Naval Armed Guards in merchant ships, the Luftwaffe attacked only at night or in twilight. For that purpose, elaborate, too elaborate tactics were worked out. Each convoy from the time it passed Alboran Island was shadowed by long-range planes. Who reported its course, speed and strength and the next step was to dispatch the tactical reconnaissance, two planes, flying low, laid the launch pointer, a line of acetylene float lights some 60 miles long, pointing toward the spot where the convoy was to meet its death near North Africa coast. There, bonfires burning by Axis spies to aid in finding convoy.

British aircraft (Beaufighters) stationed at airfields near Algiers to scout ahead of convoy for German planes and to engage them and help protect ships under attack. Convoy "UGS-38" was relying on these aircrafts to help in case of an attack. Radio communication between British aircraft and convoy escort ships were worked out, everything in readiness.

Morning of April 19, 1944 "UGS-38" was entering the Strait of Gibraltar, another great sight to be hold. Sunny day, sea gulls flying all around ships. A gigantic rock sticking up out of water a British seaport called the Rock of Gibraltar, on the European point of Spain. This port is in the future for the crew members of the Fechteler and Laning but not scheduled.

"UGS-38" passed the Rock peaceful without any trouble from all the German submarines lurking in these waters, too many DE's for the U-Boats to make a move. The most German submarines in the Mediterranean Sea, eighteen in March of 1944, most of these slipped in through the Strait underneath convoy ships entering the Mediterranean.

Convoy "UGS-38" grows larger after entering the Mediterranean, more escorts, the veteran destroyer USS Lansdale DD 426, same ship was part of the escorts of convoy "UGS-37" now joins convoy "UGS-38". The Dutch cruiser HNMS Heemskerck. A ship partly built and completed in London in 1940 after its hull being towed from Holland just prior to its invasion by the Nazi, now a part of "UGS-38". Two British minesweepers, HMS Speed and HMS Sustain, also three submarines and a tugboat HMS Vagrant was a part of the convoy. Which grew to 109 vessels, ships from horizon to horizon, could not see them all from any direction.

Afternoon of April 19th "UGS-38" was cruising slow, about 6 to 8 knots, weather still beautiful, convoy in ten columns with three British submarines 600 yards on port beam, escorts surrounding convoy. All escorts were given gunnery doctrine for this area in the event of an air attack by the enemy during darkness. doctrine, directs escorts to fire machine guns only at seen targets. All ships were well drilled to encounter enemy aircraft expected next day April 20th.

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April 20, 1944 the onslaught on convoy "UGS-38". Hitler's 55th birthday, Goering was going to try to sink the largest convoy ever to sail across the Atlantic. Was this going to be Hitler's birthday present from Goering?

The day began with regular chores aboard ship, weather pleasant. Young sailor's life seem to be safe and secure but anxiety among the crew. feeling of uncertain, it was as if everyone knew something big, something great was going to happen. Goering had his aircraft ready to fly across the Mediterranean to attack convoy "UGS-38" near North Africa coast(Torpedo Junction) where they would find bonfires to aid them. The British had their aircraft at Algiers to help protect the convoy and all of the American and British escort ships were ready for the onslaught.

The sun was setting, evening shadows was growing longer, dusk dark was approaching, no smoke screen were laid. GQ rang, boat-swain mate blew his whistle over the loud speakers and said all hands man your battle stations. Tension was growing strong among the ship's crew. Suddenly excitement began when two British aircraft was flying over convoy, traveling east from aft to forward. At first some thought they were German planes, then realized they were friendly scout planes. Just as they flew out of sight the onslaught began.

The battle was on, about 30 German planes came flying from dead ahead just above the water. Darkness began as the enemy aircraft flew in quickly like a flight of bats. Escort ships open fire, enemy aircraft dropping torpedoes, ship SS Paul Hamilton blew up like an atomic bomb. German planes being shot down by machine gun fire from escort ships. USS Lansdale was torpedoed and sinking but she did not give up without a good fight. Her gun crew were still firing their guns while ship was sinking. More planes being shot down, some hit and had to leave battle. A dog fight between a British and a German plane was observed over the convoy. Three

merchant ships hit by torpedoes, SS Samite and SS Stephen F. Austin damaged, towed to port. SS Royal Star damaged, sunk next day. Six German planes shot down, five damaged. Just as the battle came to an end, darkness had fallen but there was another plane flying high over head, Fechteler firing at plane 3 inch shells were bursting near plane, then ceasefire was given. It was a British Beaufighter plane, almost shot down by a mistake of identification. Looking back at the battle scene as the convoy sailed on, you could see a silhouette of a cloud formation against the sky that looked like the clouds of an atomic bomb explosion where Paul Hamilton blew up.

Rescue operation was outstanding and deserve the highest praise. The quick and determined action of the tug Vagrant and the USS Menges which picked up two German aviators that had been shot down, also rescued survivors of the USS Lansdale which had been torpedoed and sunk. All the escorts ships of convoy "UGS-38" deserve credit for outstanding action against the enemy.

Next day April 21st, after observing convoy five ships had been lost but convoy still consisted of over 100 ships, this teilight, escort ships laid down smoke screen to hide convoy in case of another enemy air attack. Convoy "UGS-38" made its destination, Escort ships tird up in port of Bizerta April 22nd. As escorts made their way in and around sunken ships that littered the harbor, some of the sunken ships were laying on their sides, some their mast was sticking up out of the water, as many as nineteen was counted, it looked like there were more.

During world war two, every ship building country in the world had mass productions in all shipyards. More ships were being manufactured then was sunk, 2,882 merchant ships and 175 warships of the Allies was sunk by German submarines alone. Great Britain lost the most, she also had the largest navy , Royal Navy in 1939 The United States lost most of their navy by the Japs attack on

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Pearl Harbor, December 7, 1941 but under the leadership of Secretary of the Navy, Frank Knox the United States by 1944 had built the worlds largest navy. While convoy escorts were tied up in port of Bizerta, crew members were doing their work on deck, someone noticed all escort ships had thier American flags flying at half mast in honor of Secretary Knox who had suffered a heart attack and died April 28, 1944 at age 70. He was buried with full military honors at Arlington National Cemetery. Flags on every U.S. Navy ship flew at half mast for three days.

The next convoy of task force 66 was a 106 ship Mediterranean to USA convoy "GUS38". DE's surround convoy at Bizerta and headed west for the long journey back home. The Germans were not through with trying to sink ships of the convoy. German's Admiral Doenitz was going to send his U-Boats to attack convoy before it could get out of the Mediterranean Sea

Morning of May 3rd in this area where the Mediterranean bottle narrows into a neck, the Nazi enemy was ready and waiting for "GUS-38" and in the early hours a torpedo from U-BOAT 371 crashed into USS Menges carried away both propellers and rudders and wrecked the after compartments. She stayed afloat and was towed to port. Commodore Cmdr. Duvall ordered two DE's to hunt down her assailant.

USS Pride and USS Joseph E. Campbell picked up the submarine's contact near USS Menges, HMS Blankney and HMS Sustain also French DE's L'Alcyon and Senegalais joined the hunt. For 24 hours the U-Boat evaded the search team. Finally on May 4th the desperate submarine came to the surface and torpedoed French DE Senegalais, she stayed afloat. U-Boat was hit with fire arms from escort ships, some shouting Germans were glimpsed in the water. Nazi sailors was picked up, some went down with their submarine.

May 5th, a date that will bond the crews of the USS Fechteler DE 157 and USS Laning DE 159 together for ever. One of the escorts for westbound convoy "GUS-38". The Fechteler Captain Lt., C.B. Gill plotted on with the slow ship-train which took an evasive course after the submarine attack on USS Menges. The convoy swung southward toward Oran, then headed west. Early in the morning on May 5th it was approaching the island of Alboran, a Spanish flyspeck in the center of the Mediterranean's bottleneck. Here German submarine U-Boat 967 was trying to get within range of convoy ships to try to torpedo them. Captain of the submarine knew it was going to be his last chance to sink a ship or ships of the convoy before it would leave the Mediterranean Sea that day, so the attack plan was underway.

Destroyer Escort USS Laning, Captain LtCmdr., E. Arthur Shuman, Jr. made sonar contact with a strange vessel 13 miles distant. Presently the "pip" disappeared, the vessel had submerged. The submarine alarm was flashed and the convoy made several course-changes, maneuvering to evade ambush.

Fechteler covering a sector between the convoy and the sub's reported position, was swinging right to follow a new course. Fechteler was between the submarine and a large ship, either a troopship or a hospital ship. The captain of the submarine fired his torpedo probably at the large ship. Some of the crew members of the Fechteler believes that Captain Gill maneuvered the Fechteler between the U-Boat and the large ship in order to save it, where the loss of life would have been much greater.

The Fechteler was still turning when she was rocked by a thunder-clap explosion. On the topside men were thrown from their footing on the bridge and at gun mounts. In the compartments below decks engineers and firemen were hurled against bulkheads or pitched into a jungle of shattered machines. Water spouted in through the smashed hull, and the Destroyer Escort wallowed in helpless disablement.

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Heroes, every able-bodied sailor aboard the Fechteler helped rescue all the wounded, Captain Gill saw that every injured man was put into the whaleboat or on life rafts, after all hands had abandoned ship, The water surrounding the sinking vessel was full of sailors waiting to be rescued. The USS Laning started picking up some of the survivors and before rescue efforts could get underway Laning was ordered to stop and go search for the submarine.

USS Mosley dropped extra life rafts to Fechteler survivors while they were in the water swimming trying to find anything that was afloat to hold onto, as they watched their ship sinking, what a horrible experience, knowing their fellow shipmates were going down with their ship. Some 186 survivors were picked up by the USS Laning and a rescue tug. The ship now broken in the middle cracked as the bow and stern came together in a perpendicular rise 125 feet above water. The vessel held that position for 5 minutes and sank, following a violent explosion. The rest of Fechteler's crew either perished in the torpedo blast or went down with the wreckage.

Captain Shuman of the USS Laning DE 159, there is not enough words of thanks or praises for this man who was so courageous to stop his ship dead still in the water, a setting target subject to be torpedoed at any moment during the rescue operations, for the survivors of the Fechteler. All crew members of the Laning contributed to the effort of helping save lives that moonlight morning. During the rescue operation the submarine surfaced, reason unknown, and was spotted by a boatswain mate of the Laning, the sub then submerged.

WHEN THE WHALE BOAT CAME BACK TO THE SHIP I JUMPED
DOWN INTO THE BOAT + STARTED HANDLING UP THE BODIES, THE
WHALE BOAT WAS FILLED WITH BODIES, I HAD TO STEP ON BODIES
UNTIL I WAS ABLE TO GET MY FOOTING ON THE SEATS.

Charles V. Utah

Fechteler survivors appreciate the Laning crew for rescuing them while endangering their own lives, how survivors were given everything from the Laning ship's canteen, tooth brushes, razors, candy etc. Even loaning their shoes, clothes and blankets. Gave survivors their peacoats to ward off the chill while transferring them to Gibraltar. Treating and given medical aid to the wounded sailors. One of Fechteler survivors, Malichi Rich was seriously wounded. His foot was cut open like a sardine can, said Robert Jones one of the crew members of the Laning who helped with medical aid to the injured survivors. These two ex-sailors would meet again 46 years later at a ship reunion.

Willis Walker one of the Fechteler survivors made this statement. The USS Fechteler DE 157 was honored, she was just a small insignificant ship in a big war. Built in just a few weeks, minimal cost and just another unit in a large navy, they probably used cheap champagne to christen her. With just a few seasoned navy men, "Old Salts" and some 200 sparsely trained rookies, we were soon pressed into convoy duty on seas filled with German U-Boats. During the eleven months of her life we did many missions for the war effort. Our ship got some real tough duty assignments. We soon realized that our ship and its crew were expendable. This did not discourage us but caused us to give total effort to the cause of freedom.

On May 5, 1944 our ship the USS Fechteler DE 157 and her crew received the highest honor given any U.S. NAVY ship and crew. As the USS Laning DE 159 sailed out of the port of Gibraltar after unloading Fechteler survivors which she saw standing on the deck of a merchant ship, she was at quarters, her flag was "DIPPED" saluting our ship and her crew.

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The Blue-jacket Manuel states "The National Flag is never dipped except in answer to the dip of a merchant ship". We who observed this salute know it was for us and not the merchant ship. We were honored by our peers. As the Laning sailed out of sight sailors of both ships wondered if this would be the last relations between two ships and their crews.

Mediterranean Sea, war zone, battlefield for the convoy of "UGS-38" time it entered the Strait of Gibraltar until "GUS-38" exited the Strait. Here is the final tally sheet of the battles of task force 66.

8 ships torpedoed, 1 blown into bits, 3 sunk, 4 towed to port. 5 ships torpedoed by German aircraft. USS Lansdale DD 426, sunk, 47 killed. M/V Paul Hamilton exploded, 580 killed. M/V Royal Star sunk. M/V Samite towed. M/V Stephen F. Austin towed. 3 ships torpedoed by German submarines. USS Menges DE 320 towed, 31 killed. French DE Senegalais towed. USS Fechteler DE 157 sunk, 29 killed. 11 German aircraft hit by firearms, 6 shot down, 5 damaged. 1 U-Boat sunk, U-371, 49 Germans captured, 2 pilots, 47 seamen. Over 700 casualties.

Thanks to the "DESA NEWS", now DE Ship Reunions are easier to formulate. Survivors of the USS Fechteler for a few short years have held their reunions on May 5th the anniversary date of the ship's sinking. The 1990 ship reunion (46th anniversary) Pigeon Forge, Tennessee was an historical event. Their guest was former crew members of their sister ship the USS Laning and Captain E. Arthur Shuman, Jr. and wife Polly was special guests. Captain Shuman spoke at the banquet, everyone in attendance was honored by his presents. While he was at the ship reunion he won a ship model of the sinking of the USS Fechteler. The model was made by the talented Curtis Toombs a survivor of the Fechteler who is a big help at all reunions.

The first ship reunion of the USS Landing DE 159 was hosted by Jim and Kate Graham, August 17-19, 1990, Lawrenceburg, Tennessee. Their guest was former crew members of their sister ship the USS Fechteler. A great time was had by all in attendance. Jim and Kate went all out to show everyone a good time. There were welcome signs throughout the town for visitors of both ships. The Banquet was super, and held on Jim's Birthday with a huge cake with the picture of the USS Laning DE 159 on it made of cake icing. At the last ship reunions, it was agreed by both ship's crews to combine ship reunions into one reunion and to hold them on May 5th each year. So "May 5th" which bonded the Fechteler and Laning crew in 1944, that same bond will continue for years to come.

In closing this story, findings were in history books, National Archives, ship histories and from crew members of both ships.

Submitted by;

James R. Tipton, S 1/c

USS Fechteler DE 157

James R. Tipton 12-7-90